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THE INDOCHINA ENIGMA

ANNCR:

NEWS ANALYST FRED GALVAN EXAMINES REPORTS OF A GROWING TIDE OF REFUGEES ENTERING THAILAND FROM CAMBODIA, LAOS AND VIETNAM.

VOICE:

IN A 1939 RADIO BROADCAST, SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL SAID OF THE SOVIET UNION THAT IT WAS "A RIDDLE WRAPPED IN A MYSTERY INSIDE AN ENIGMA." EVEN AT THIS DISTANCE IN TIME, THOSE WORDS BY SIR WINSTON ABOUT ONE COMMUNIST STATE HAVE ANOTHER APPLICATION TO MUCH OF THE WORLD OUTSIDE INDOCHINA, WHOSE CLOSED COMMUNIST SOCIETIES PROVIDE A NEW MYSTERY IN OUR TIME. FOR WHAT IS GOING ON BEHIND THE BORDERS OF LAOS AND CAMBODIA AND, TO A LESSER EXTENT, IN VIETNAM IS REVEALED ONLY PARTIALLY BY REFUGEES FROM THE THREE INDOCHINESE STATES. THE ACCOUNTS ARE THE SOURCE OF REPORTS REACHING WASHINGTON IN RECENT DAYS FROM VARIOUS QUARTERS -- THAI OFFICIALS, THE U.N. HIGH COMMISSION FOR REFUGEES, AND PRESS CORRESPONDENTS.

ONE SUCH REPORT COMES FROM BERNARD GWERTZMAN, A NEW YORK TIMES CORRESPONDENT STATIONED HERE IN WASHINGTON. HIS INFORMATION ON THE SITUATION IN LAOS IS DRAWN FROM INTERVIEWS WITH LAO, VIETNAMESE AND CAMBODIAN REFUGEES AND FROM LETTERS THAT INMATES IN CAMPS IN INDOCHINA HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SEND TO RELATIVES LIVING OUTSIDE THE AREA. ACCORDING TO THESE REPORTS, SOME FORTY TO FIFTY THOUSAND RIGHTIST LAO SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS ARE DOING HARD LABOR ON INADEQUATE FOOD RATIONS AND MEDICAL CARE. THEY ALSO SAY THAT ANY UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPTS AT ESCAPE FROM THE CAMPS ARE PUNISHABLE BY SUMMARY EXECUTION.

IN VIETNAM, MISTER GWERTZMAN'S SOURCES SAY, FROM ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND TO THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND FORMER SAIGON GOVERNMENT SOLDIERS AND CIVILIAN OFFICIALS ARE STILL HELD IN RE-EDUCATION CAMPS. THE VIETNAMESE, HE NOTES, HAVE OFFICIALLY SAID THE "RE-EDUCATION" CAMP TERM LASTS THREE YEARS. THE DEATH RATE AT THE CENTERS IS SAID TO BE HIGH BECAUSE OF POOR FOOD AND DEFICIENT MEDICAL ATTENTION.

BUT THE REAL ENIGMA CONTINUES TO BE CAMBODIA, WHERE CONDITIONS ARE SAID TO BE THE WORST IN INDOCHINA. BUT MISTER GWERTZMAN SAYS THERE'S BEEN A GRADUAL IMPROVEMENT AS FOOD HAS BECOME MORE AVAILABLE. THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE NOTES THAT THE DEATH TOLL CAUSED BY THE FORCED EVACUATION OF PHNOM PENH AND MARCHES TO RURAL AREAS BY THE CITY'S CIVILIAN POPULATION IS KNOWN TO BE EXTREMELY HIGH. AS FAR AS IS KNOWN, THE TIMES CORRESPONDENT SAYS, MEMBERS OF THE FORMER LON NOL GOVERNMENT WHO STAYED IN CAMBODIA HAVE BEEN KILLED.

MEANWHILE, FROM BANGKOK COME REPORTS OF A SWELLING TIDE OF REFUGEES FROM LAOS, CAMBODIA AND VIETNAM -- A TIDE WHICH HAS THE THAI GOVERNMENT CONCERNED. THERE ARE NOW AN ESTIMATED SEVENTY-SIX THOUSAND INDOCHINESE REFUGEES LIVING IN THAILAND. AND UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERIOR DAMRONG TOLD CORRESPONDENTS LAST WEEK THAT THE INFLUX HAS GROWN DRAMATICALLY IN THE PAST THREE MONTHS.

JS/PY